

RESONANT RESPONSE MATCHING CIRCUIT FOR HEARING AID

Background of the Invention

1. Field of the Invention -

The present invention relates generally to a circuit for
5 and method of processing an audio frequency signal and more
particularly relates to hearing aid signal processing.

2. Description of the prior art -

It is well known in the art to utilize electronic devices
to assist the hearing impaired. The earliest such instruments
10 consisted of a microphone coupled to an electronic amplifier
which was in turn coupled to an earphone. Quite apart from
the technical difficulties experienced, these early hearing
aids were sufficiently large and intrusive that the hearing
impaired could be readily identified providing a degree of
15 self-consciousness.

The coming of electronic miniaturization and sub-
miniaturization permitted the manufacture of hearing aid
systems which are totally inserted in the outer auditory canal
during use. The resulting systems provide substantially
20 greater hearing assistance along with a much more pleasing
(and almost unnoticeable) aesthetic appearance. A modern,
totally in-the-ear device has a microphone acoustically
coupled to the ambient with all of the electronics packaged in
a form factor which is accommodated by the outer ear of the

patient. A transducer is electronically coupled to the output stage of the hearing aid circuit and acoustically coupled to the distal portion of the outer auditory canal.

U.S. Patent No. 4,689,818, issued to Ammitzboll on August 5 1987, purports to describe the circuitry and operation of the Siemens Custom In-The-Ear Hearing Aid 007, sold by Siemens Hearing Instruments, Inc. This is a typical example of a totally in-the-ear device.

A key problem in the miniaturization process is reducing 10 the size of the battery. Whereas substantial progress has been made in battery development, much credit is also appropriately given to designers of low power consumption electronic circuitry. Current state of the art instruments utilize class D output stages which are particularly helpful 15 in reducing overall power consumption. However, as is known to those of skill in the art, the class D output stage tends to have a frequency response curve whose peak gain frequency is not easily modified to accommodate differences in patient pathologies. Yet, abnormalities in middle ear functioning are 20 known to shift the peak in the unaided ear canal resonance to a lower frequency.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention overcomes the disadvantages of the prior art by providing a technique for utilizing the power saving characteristics of a class D output stage within a 5 system which has sufficient adjustability in frequency response peak gain frequency to accommodate various differences in patient-to-patient middle ear pathology. Specifically, the present invention employs an active low-pass filter which has adjustable overshoot. This filter is coupled 10 through a buffering stage to the class D output amplifier. By adjusting the degree of overshoot, the level of the peak in the frequency response of the entire system is readily adjustable within a given therapeutic range even though the class D output amplifier is inherently difficult to tune.

15 When practicing the present invention, the resonance curve of the outer auditory canal of the patient is determined utilizing existing techniques. This curve is relatively consistent for patients having normal ear physiology. However, various middle ear pathologies often lower the 20 frequency of the basic resonance producing a unique frequency response curve for a given patient.

In accordance with the present invention, the overshoot of the low pass filter stage is adjusted such that the

frequency response curve of the hearing aid system most nearly matches the resonance curve of the patient's outer auditory canal. Thus, when the hearing aid is properly inserted, the resulting interface between the hearing assistance device and 5 the patient's middle ear are very closely correlated.

As a result of this frequency response match, the patient is provided with a smooth insertion frequency response without extra amplification at the frequency of the ear canal resonance. The advantages of lower power consumption, 10 lessened probability of acoustic feedback, and improved auditory acuity are the direct products of practicing the present invention.

In a preferred mode of practicing the present invention and not to be deemed to be limiting of the scope of the 15 invention, the output of the preamp or signal processing stage is applied to a standard R-C circuit. The resulting signal is coupled through a variable resistor to an amplifying stage, wherein the resistance variability adjusts the overshoot. The active low pass filter output is capacitively coupled to a 20 buffering stage employing a normal operational amplifier. The output of the buffering stage is applied directly to the class D output amplifier.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Other objects of the present invention and many of the attendant advantages of the present invention will be readily appreciated as the same becomes better understood by reference 5 to the following detailed description when considered in connection with the accompanying drawings, in which like reference numerals designate like parts throughout the figures thereof and wherein:

FIG. 1 is the 2cc coupler frequency response of a typical 10 ITE hearing aid with a class D output stage in the hearing aid receiver;

FIG. 2 are real ear IG frequency response curves in: a) the unoccluded outer auditory canal of a patient with normal 15 middle ear function (REUR -- bottom) and b) with the hearing aid of Fig. 1 (REAR -- top);

Fig. 3 is the response curve of Fig. 1 superimposed over the response curve shifted with the active low pass filter for a patient with abnormal middle ear pathology; and

Fig. 4 is a detailed electronic schematic diagram of the 20 signal processing circuit of the preferred mode of the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

The present invention is described in accordance with several preferred embodiments which are to be viewed as illustrative without being limiting. In the preferred mode, 5 the present invention is employed as a totally within the ear hearing aid system having a class D output stage.

Fig. 1 is diagram 10 showing the 2cc coupler frequency response of a typical ITE hearing aid with a class D output stage in the hearing aid receiver. Abscissa 14 is a 10 logarithmic plot of frequency in kilohertz. Ordinate 12 shows the gain at each frequency plotted in decibels.

In a patient having normal middle ear physiology, the ear canal can be thought of as an open organ pipe having a primary resonance at about 2.8 kilohertz and a relatively flat 15 response from about 300 hertz to about 3 kilohertz. As shown in diagram 10, gain curve 16 for the hearing aid is deliberately designed to match this response to replace the peak in gain lost when the ear canal is occluded by an ear mold. Gain peak 18 occurs at about 2.8 kilohertz.

Fig. 2 is diagram 11 showing the real ear IG frequency response curves in: a) the unoccluded outer auditory canal of a patient with normal middle ear function (bottom) and b) with the hearing aid of Fig. 1 (top). The bottom curve is a typical resonance curve of the unoccluded outer auditory canal (REUR) of a patient having normal middle ear physiology. Abscissa 17 is a logarithmic plot of frequency in kilohertz. Ordinate 19 shows the resonance at each frequency plotted in decibels. The top curve is the typical real ear output of the hearing aid of Fig. 1 in the ear canal whose unaided ear canal response is shown by the REUR curve.

As explained above, the ear canal can be thought of as an open organ pipe having a primary resonance at about 2.8 kilohertz and a relatively flat response from about 300 hertz to about 3 kilohertz. As shown in diagram 11, REUR curve 15 shows the resonance curve for the typical patient. Resonance peak occurs at about 2.8 kilohertz.

For a hearing impaired patient having a totally in-the-ear hearing aid device, the outer auditory canal is totally or partially blocked thus removing the natural resonance at resonance peak 18. However, it is typical that the class D amplifiers employed in current devices deliberately have a

corresponding response peak at about 2.8 kilohertz (see also Fig. 1). Thus, the totally in-the-ear hearing aid device having the class D amplifier can easily provide hearing assistance with a response similar to the non-hearing 5 impaired ear as shown by REAR curve 13.

Fig. 3 is a diagram 20 showing a 2cc coupler response curve 16 of Fig. 1 superimposed upon shifted response curve in a 2cc coupler 22 for a patient having a typical middle ear pathology which lowers the primary resonance of resonance 10 curve 22 to resonance peak 24. For this example, peak 24 occurs at about 1.2 kilohertz. -8--8-

A number of various problems can cause this lowering of the resonance of the outer auditory canal including punctured ear drum, abnormal middle ear bone physiology, etc. If a 15 standard totally in-the-ear hearing aid device, having a class D output amplifier, is utilized in the patient of resonance curve 22, there will be a substantial mismatch in the frequency response curve of the hearing aid device and that of the open ear of the patient.

20 This mismatch renders most hearing aids incapable of providing enough amplification at the abnormally low resonant peak of frequency of the patient. The result is under-

amplification at this frequency and a jagged insertion gain frequency response.

Fig. 4 is a detailed electronic schematic diagram 26 showing the critical circuitry of the preferred mode of the 5 present invention. To properly practice the invention, the unaided ear canal resonance curve (REUR) of a given patient is obtained by measurement in accordance with standard procedures and the circuit of the present invention is tuned to match this measured resonance curve, before the device is released 10 to the patient for use.

Microphone 28 is a standard hearing aid microphone acoustically coupled to the ambient. The signal produced by microphone 28 is coupled through standard preamplifier 20 and standard signal processing stage 31 to the low pass filter 15 consisting of resistor 30 and capacitor 32. Variable resistor 38 couples the filtered signal to operational amplifier 42 and forms another pole of the low pass filter with capacitor 40. In this way, variable resistor 38 controls the amplification gain of the overshoot and the peak frequency of the low pass 20 filter. Thus, variable resistor 38 controls frequency of peak gain in the frequency response curve of the entire hearing aid system.

The processed audio frequency signal is capacitively coupled via capacitor 44 to operational amplifier 50 via resistor 46. Resistor 48 provides feedback for operational amplifier 50 which functions as a buffering stage between the 5 active low pass filter stage and the class D output amplifier.

The output of operational amplifier 50 is capacitively coupled via capacitor 52 to standard class D output amplifier 54.

Having thus described the preferred embodiments of the 10 present invention, those of skill in the art will be readily able to adapt the teachings found herein to yet other embodiments within the scope of the claims hereto attached.

It will be understood that this disclosure, in many respects, is only illustrative. Changes may be made in 15 details, particularly in matters of shape, size, material, and arrangement of parts without exceeding the scope of the invention. Accordingly, the scope of the invention is as defined in the language of the appended claims.